

Return to
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Aron

Edward Hicks, Loyalist Spy.

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John Hicks came from Wales to America about the middle of the eighteenth century, and settled on Long Island. He had a son Edward, who moved to Philadelphia, and prospered there. At the outbreak of the Revolution he had four grown sons, Edward, Benjamin, Joseph and Joshua.

All of them except Benjamin took the Loyalist side, and even Benjamin seems merely to have been left behind to take care of the family property while his father and brothers went off to fight.

~~Of Edward Hicks, Senior, and Joseph and Joshua~~
They apparently struck northward and joined the

British forces under Colonel Butler, and at some subsequent date, Benjamin too escaped from

the rebel persecution raging in Philadelphia and enlisted in the same corps.

Of the family Edward Hicks, Junior, showed most military ability. He was a man of six feet and possessed of extraordinary strength and endurance. To him was given the most perilous duty a soldier can be asked to undertake, that of a spy in the enemy lines.

The British had been driven from Boston early in the war, and the city was the northern headquarters of the rebel forces. Military information from such a centre was of the utmost value. At the same time the ~~population of~~ ^{inhabitants} Boston were fanatically insurgent, merciless and suspicious.

Into this lion's den Edward Hicks penetrated in the guise of a young Quaker. That Quakers were non-combatants had come to be accepted even in the heat of civil war, and the disguise was therefore a good one. He gave himself out as in search of his mother, from whom he had become separated in the military turmoil.

The big, quiet, gentle-spoken youth in his sober Quaker garments was to be seen wandering somewhat aimlessly about Boston, enquiring with an air of the greatest simplicity at taverns and other public places of news of an old woman. No one had much time to pay attention to him, for Major-General Prescott was in occupation of Rhode Island and known to be preparing to strike

a deadly blow at Boston from the south.

Politics and war were the only subjects of discussion in the taverns, and Americans were not accustomed to set a guard upon their tongues. They criticized Congress and the conduct of operations generally, each man eager to tell what he knew and so confound others, and a great deal of military information might be picked up by a man who kept his mouth shut and his ears open.

Discussion grew into argument, argument into altercation, rum and political passion combined to produce an explosion. The tavern was full of shouting, fighting men. Hicks, attempt^{ing}ed to edge out of the press with a half-drunken man bawling

that he was a dirty, cowardly, traitorous Quaker who wouldn't fight for freedom, ~~and~~ ran right into the arms of the hastily summoned watch.

Brawling was strictly forbidden in Boston just then because of its dangerous situation, and all the disputants, and Hicks along with them, were haled off to the guardhouse. Here one by one they were examined, cautioned and let go, all but Hicks. A suspicious officer listened to his tale and shook his head. Hicks was led away and put into a cell by himself, after being carefully searched.

He was soon brought up for trial. The prosecutors were not concerned about proving his guilt: it was sufficient that he could not prove his innocence. He was swiftly condemned and sentenced to be hanged.

He maintained throughout the placid attitude common among Quakers. He seemed simple and rather stupid, and his captors were only half convinced of his guilt. Though they put handcuffs on him he was entrusted to the care of only one guard, who regarded him with contempt.

Boston was still a comparatively small place, and the prison lay on the outskirts, backed by the wooded hills overlooking the bay. Hicks shambled dejectedly along, his guard marching carelessly at his side. There were few people in sight, the prison only a short distance away.

Suddenly Hicks swung about, his manacled hands came down with a thud on the head of the guard.

The guard dropped like a stone, a passer-by shouted

an alarm, and Hicks dashed for the woods.

His position remained desperate enough even then.

The gyves were strong and he could not free his

hands; the whole country was up behind him; the

city was surrounded by a line of military outposts

which he must somehow evade, and his size and

quaker dress made him a conspicuous object.

Still he ran on, hearing the hue and cry

rising behind him. He came to a stream. Here

was a milldam with the water cascading over it.

Without hesitation, he plunged down the bank into

the water, and pressed himself tight to the face

of the dam behind the curtain of falling water.

Men on foot and on horseback burst out of

the woods and came racing down to the stream.

Many dashed right across and began to beat the coverts on the other side, but others remained behind, searching through the mill, and questioning the miller and his family. None of them had seen the fugitive. The stream was swift and the pool under the dam deep. When every nook and corner in the mill had been searched, and some of the pursuers had returned with the strong belief that the fugitive was still in the vicinity, they began to beat the bushes along the bank.

A man came actually to the foot of the dam, and entered the water, but the swirling current almost took him off his feet. He shouted that no man living was strong enough to force his way

under the fall, and made for shore. Hicks, standing waist deep in water, his face pressed against the dam in order to get air enough to keep him from suffocation, remained where he was until the searchers had departed with the coming of night.

Then he tried to creep out, but the miller's dog heard him and began to bark, and he had to shrink back behind the curtain of falling water. He saw that if he was to have any chance to escape he must free his hands. One of the rough stones of which the dam was built protruded a sharp angle. He hammered the chain of his handcuffs upon it, wrenching and twisting until the iron bit into his wrists and made the blood flow.

At last the stubborn metal yielded to the stubborn will and mighty strength of the man. A link snapped, a little more twisting and his hands were free. He found a relatively dry niche still screened by the falling water, and in that he huddled. Night passed, but morning brought a steady traffic of farmers rumbling up to the ~~the~~ mill with their wagons. All day long he crouched there, wet to the skin, numb with cold and aching with hunger.

When night came at last, desperation nerved him to make a dash from his hiding place. The dog set up a furious barking, but a well aimed stone sent him yelping back to the house.

What Hicks needed now was food, he was starving and his legs were growing weak. He rested and dried his clothes, and towards morning crept up to a farmhouse. A rooster began to crow, and with the first pale streaks of dawn, the hens came out from the ~~xxx~~ barn and began clucking and scratching in the dust. Hicks watched them with famished eyes, a stone clenched in his fist. A bird gradually approached him, he rose silently to his knees, and flung. The bird was down, squawking and fluttering. He pounced on it, snatched it up and fled.

• He had no means of making a fire, nor would it have been safe to do so. He ate that hen raw, and felt a marvellous upsurge of new strength.

There still remained the far-flung line of outposts and mounted patrols to penetrate.

Slipping cautiously from covert to covert, creeping along fences, giving all buildings a wide berth, he worked up into the hills. Here farms were few and he could move openly and make better time.

He was proceeding along a trail with a steep bare hillside on one hand and a belt of woodland on the other, when a mounted patrol came clattering up behind him. He broke for the shelter of the woods. He was hailed, guns banged and carbine balls whistled past his ears. He forced his weary legs to a spurt - and halted dead. The ~~was~~ trees ceased abruptly, and the ground fell away sheer

with the treetops seventy feet below.

He ran along the edge of the cliff, seeking a way down. There was none. His pursuers came crashing through the thicket, shouting. Immediately below, a clump of bushes jutted out from the face of the precipice. The patrol saw him poise himself and leap outward, and reined their horses back on their haunches. Dismounting, they advanced cautiously to the lip of the drop and looked down.

"Well, if he's down there," said one, "he's either dead or dying. It's a ten-mile ride to get down where he is, and we ain't got time. He was only a damned Tory anyhow." They remounted and rode off.

But Hicks was neither dead nor dying, though badly cut, bruised and shaken up. He had caught the bushes on the face of the cliff. Though they tore out by the roots, they checked his fall. Sliding and rolling, he crashed into the topmost branches of a small pine, and slid off to the ground. He lay there for awhile until his breath had returned and his head cleared. Then he rose indomitably and limped away.

He had many adventures still to pass through, but he was never again in such peril. Beyond the rebel lines, he found loyalist sympathizers, who fed and sheltered him and helped him ~~on his way~~, *along* and so, by devious routes, he made his way back to

the British lines, and served through until the end of the war.

The family ^{were} were fortunate, in that all four brothers came through the long series of campaigns unscathed, and all settled in Prince Edward County as U.E.Loyalists.

Edward Hicks settled in North Marysburg, and left two sons at his death, Edward and John.

Joseph Hicks married Elizabeth Harrison. Joshua, the youngest brother, was twice married, and settled in South Marysburg. Some of their descendants are still to be found in the county.

Benjamin Hicks is the one known to be connected with Peel. He had two sons, Daniel and Benjamin, of whom Daniel received a hundred acres of Lot 9,

and a hundred acres of Lot 10, Concession 1,
Caledon West, as a U.E.L. grant.

In 1837, John A. Hicks was living on Lot
20, Con. 5, Chinguacousy W., and Samuel B. and
George B. Hicks were living on Lot 30, Con. 5,
Chinguacousy.